

# Online-Forum in Asia

## Opportunity for Christian NGO's to join forces

*By David Lin\**

Never before has this happened in the last 50 years in the history of Asia. North and South Korea defrosted their hostile confrontation by establishing closer contacts with each other. Their current reconciliation effort, the hot spot in international news, marks the end of the north-south tension. A dream a year ago and for many maybe for a few decades in the past, it's a reality today.

The news of Korean reconciliation brought back many memories to me, not only because I visited North Korea's Panmunjom (where the division of north-south Korea lies) in my former capacity as a church journalist back in 1989. But also because the news is so related to the theme that I am writing about - the use of new technology by Asia Region-WACC (AR-WACC).

AR-WACC's history of using new technology, as far as I can remember as Asia Regional Co-ordinator since 1994, can be traced back to October 1996. The regional association had its triennial assembly in Chiangmai, Thailand. AR-WACC set the theme "The Technology Revolution: Its Challenge to the Asian Communicator" for its pre-assembly seminar.

In the assembly seminar (supported by a grant from the German development agency EZE), I witnessed 60 participants from 11 Asian countries study the use of basic web language HTML (hyper-text markup language) to make homepages, exposed to memory chips and modem on the motherboard of a PC (personal computer), learn desktop publishing, and listen to a panel. The panel focussed on the strength and weakness of using Internet in church mission and development and for women, youth and children.

At that assembly, only six participants had an email address. None at all had a homepage. Naturally, there was a cry from a few participants alerting us to the fact that they lived in places which are backward in infrastructure, without adequate phone lines or phone sets, not to mention a computer set.

Three years later, in the subsequent triennial assembly held in Hong Kong in October 1999, 45 of the 60 participants have email addresses. At least 10 of the organisations they represented have a homepage of their own. They are all corporate or personal members of WACC, from the Philippines, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan.

The surge in email addresses was noticeable to me because as moderator of the AR-WACC Online Forum on the assembly seminar theme, "Communication for Reconciliation in the Asian Context", I had to register participants' emails. Only upon registration of their emails would

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they be able to send and receive email submissions by other participants through the exchange facility of the host of the Listserve.

One might ask: what does this enormous leap from six email addresses to 45 within three years' time mean to the Asian Christian communication scene? I think this means that email is no longer a product that belongs to the elite of society. It has become so common that it's available to our WACC members who are grassroot communicators. How should we react to this phenomenon, to this reality of telecommunication? I can quickly say that this includes both opportunities and challenges. Let me talk about the opportunities first.

AR-WACC's Online Forum was made possible by the free service offered by ChurchNet, an NGO based in Seoul, South Korea administered by a WACC corporate member. The location is excellent and within one year South and North Korea started its reconciliation process. I can't help but recall this Korean link in the entire scenario of AR-WACC priority concern on reconciliation and new technology.

Engaging ChurchNet in the team to provide hosting of Listserve would moreover realise my vision of bridging the digital-divide, between those who can afford access to internet and those who cannot, and serving the whole Christian communicator community in Asia.

Listserve at that time was facilitated mainly through emails, however I found that not all Asian WACC members had email despite the surge in the number of users. So I suggested the design of a homepage that allows users (who can't use email but manage to access a homepage) to submit their comments through a form in the homepage via a "Write" button [www.churchnet-kr.org/arwacc-forum/discussion.htm](http://www.churchnet-kr.org/arwacc-forum/discussion.htm), which would in effect transmit the email message to all registered email users in the Listserve.

This dual method of electronic access revolutionised the traditional use of Listserve (only via email) by many NGOs and church agencies at that time, and was used by AR-WACC for the first time.

I also insisted on having at least one moderator for the online discussions because discussions would be disorganised without moderating, lose direction and miss the objectives.

Another traditional way of using Listserve is to leave it open for use without mentioning a deadline date for closing up. This is of course natural for net users, because once you run the Listserve operation, there's no limitation of use at all due to the vast space available in cyberspace.

However, I see it differently. My concept is that we should inform the participants of the time duration for Listserve use. A timeframe will enhance the quality of discussion when participants know the amount of time they have for the discussion of topics. This method eventually proved very efficient, I call it Listserve moderating and management, the idea originated from moderating a meeting in real life.

I started Listserve on September 21<sup>st</sup> 1999, with a test message and ended on January 31<sup>st</sup> 2000, after the participants requested an extension on the original closing date of November 31<sup>st</sup> 1999. This deadline was designed to give a one month post-assembly discussion after the AR-WACC assembly, so that follow-up action could take place after all participants returned to their home countries. However, online participants were enthused by the post-assembly



discussions and requested the continuation of the online forum beyond the end of November deadline for the following reasons:

- a) a fresh discussion on Dalit issues between an online participant who couldn't attend the Hong Kong assembly and a participant who attended the assembly;
- b) exchange of messages on solidarity and support among the online members, particularly on the labour dispute case in the Philippines and the worsening conflict situation in Aceh, Indonesia;
- c) photos of the assembly posted on the homepage stimulated more interest in online discussion, brought back fond memories of fellowship and interaction among members;
- d) last but not least, the approach of Christmas and the New Millennium. Participants felt that the online forum provided a good platform for them to enter into the new era together as a form of reconciliation, solidarity and alliance.

These are some of the welcoming signs of the online forum. But the forum that is embedded with questions pre-designed to guide participants in the discussion is also part of the success. The first question that came to my mind when designing the online forum was how to make the online forum a user-friendly one. To be user-friendly, like a real life meeting, it has to have a clear theme, interesting sub-topics for discussion, a friendly environment as opposed to an over-heated, verbally violent discussion, and the sub-topics will have to be used in small group discussions in the real seminar as a continuation of the online discussion and to allow non-online members to have a chance to discuss the same topics.

With the understanding of the AR-WACC Executive Committee members, especially those who were the preparatory members of the assembly seminar, I uploaded the eight questions under the umbrella theme, "Communication for Reconciliation in the Asian context". They are:

Question 1: On values of human dignity

Question 2: What constitutes "human dignity" based on your faith and in the context of where you come from?

Question 3: On peace

Question 4: On freedom of expression, quality of life, market economy

Question 5: What are the present problems that hamper the equality of resource sharing and freedom of media?

Question 6: On nationalism

Question 7: On your faith and reflection

Question 8: If you are a media worker, how can you help reconcile conflicts and promote peace?

I made a public invitation to all Listserve members to respond to all the questions. I did not of course, expect all the 45 members registered to respond, but my estimation was that as long as there were three or four statements I could use them as chat up points. In fact, I would be in trouble if I had 45 responses because that would be too big a job for one online moderator. At the same time I designed the questions, I also laid out the rules of the online forum discussion. This was one of the delicate parts in the whole exercise. One has to walk between the lines of

freedom of expression and the demand to keep the integrity of the discussion without anyone being hurt by offensive statements. I finally called them "house rules" highlighting standards as well as responsibilities in keeping the forum as a place for the whole community to use. In the end, no rule was violated and I was happy that I didn't have to use any of the rules at all.

Here are some statistics that might interest you. A total of 178 messages were posted on the online forum between September 21<sup>st</sup> 1999 and January 31<sup>st</sup> 2000. Those who submitted their messages came from Pakistan, India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan. The only non-Asian message came from the WACC Global President Albert van den Huevel, from the Netherlands. There were greeting messages from the WACC global officers in Argentina and Australia. Greetings also came from the WACC General Secretary Carlos Valle. These were real boosts to the Asian community's first ever online effort. I had personal talks with members who did not submit but just read the online messages. They said that although the majority just read the messages, they became an educational bulletin board from which they got ideas for their own work. The homepage counter recorded more than 750 hits (the number of times the online forum homepage was opened by users). The ChurchNet Administrator reported that half of the hits came from Asia and half from non-Asian sources (including homepage addresses registered in USA as <.net> <.org> or <.com> etc. though they might be located in Asia and Pacific and other continents.)

There were a few climaxes in this new media exercise. When Pakistan had the military coup that overthrew the president, I wrote an appeal to all participants on the situation and our Pakistani member received lots of prayer mails. He in turn reported first hand what was happening in the city he lived and worked in. His mail became the most updated information on the media and political situation in Pakistan during the coup crisis.

Our Indonesian members provided penetrating perspectives on the religious (Islam vs. Christianity) and ethnic conflicts (Indonesian vs. ethnic Chinese) in Indonesia and gave a thorough interpretation of the rather complex situation in Asia's largest Muslim country.

A Korean homepage allowed users to build peace on the internet. This alerted all of us to the conflict on the Korean peninsula, yet there were chances to contribute to peace through the Internet which has no national borders.

The online forum also brought some challenges:

a)Language: Asia, like Europe, has more than 20 languages. Using English to communicate seems to be the only way for such regional discussions. Skill in English writing is essential for efficient communication. Lack of this skill hampers participation.

b)Email connection: technical support plays an important part to ensure email is received by the participants. Sometimes the moderator had to use FAX to supplement when email didn't work due to electricity or server breakdown, virus or hacker attack.

c)Many readers, few writers: online forum should not stand alone. Face-to-face meeting of online participants is more important than cyber-discussion which is really only an alternative. Moreover, it is essential to genuine discussion that participants understand the new medium. For example, online participants have to be responsive to arguments and willing to write. Only a few wrote to the forum before the seminar, but contributions increased after the seminar was held. This proved something, didn't it?

d)Need to train more online moderators: If online forum is to be used more and more in national or regional conferences, moderated online forums will need more moderators to facilitate discussions. We need to train more people in this new field.

e)Need more participation and voice in the cyber-world through homepage making as a way to bridge the digital division: The presence of grassroots communicators in the increasingly popular cyber-world is a critical step of empowerment and awareness building on human dignity and reconciliation issues. AR-WACC's three-year regional project titled "Alternative Media and Information Society" will address this and other related issues. The first year's activity will be the regional consultation to be held in Hong Kong from 12<sup>th</sup> –16<sup>th</sup> October, 2000. Details of this consultation can be found in the AR-WACC homepage (see address below).

AR-WACC has, under my co-ordination, entered into the e-communication era. It has its homepage [www.arwacc.org](http://www.arwacc.org) as an alternative means for advocacy of Christian values of communication, for community building and for making their presence and voice heard in the cyber world. The regional association's business has been conducted through a private password-controlled homepage that serves as a bulletin board for decision making. The homepage is managed by a Japanese webmaster. It is an example of the alliance of digital have and have-nots, encapsulating eight countries in Asia — South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, Thailand, India, Indonesia and Myanmar where the Excom members come from. Recently the Korean hosting service has been extended to the WACC Pacific Region [www.pacificwacc.org](http://www.pacificwacc.org), giving a helping hand to the south Pacific WACC members because of the high price of owning a homepage in that region. I'll help design the pacific homepage until they have trained the webmaster to update and upgrade their own site. I'm sure this kind of Internet service can be extended to other regions of WACC or partner organisations upon request.

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